

CORE OFFER BUDGET FOR GROUNDS MAINTENANCE INCLUDING COMMUNITY HOUSING SERVICES, PARKS AND COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

WHY DOES THE COUNCIL HAVE TO PROVIDE THIS SERVICE AND WHAT DOES IT NEED TO COVER?

The Council has health and safety responsibilities and also owes a duty of care to ensure that people do not come to harm when visiting parks and open spaces and needs to maintain sight lines for safe passage on the highway and playing pitches, as this service will continue to be offered. Apart from those duties the condition that the land is kept in has been more a matter of civic pride but this is now under considerable financial pressure.

HOW DOES THE CORE OFFER BUDGET MEET THE COUNCIL'S OBLIGATIONS?

It is believed that the services below will meet the Council's obligations.

DOES THIS DIFFER FROM THE CURRENT SERVICE?

This proposal covers a number of areas: grounds maintenance and horticulture, including grass cutting, shrub/hedge maintenance, leaf clearance, floral displays, general grounds maintenance work, repairs and maintenance, parks and open spaces, rural road grass cutting, weed control, Council house work including garden maintenance and sheltered accommodation.

The details of the proposal are set out below and can be summarised as follows:

- No grass cutting or horticultural work in any open space including all parks and nature reserves
- No grass cutting on roadside verges
- No support to any voluntary groups including Friends, Street Champions and Darlington Cares
- No floral displays
- Overall, this will mean that all open spaces and parks will become extremely unsightly, become litter traps and attract anti-social behaviour, graffiti and vandalism due to their run-down appearance. In contrast to this, Council housing estates will continue to be maintained to existing standards as they are funded through the HRA.

Grass Cutting

This includes grass cutting of all roadside verges, open spaces on housing estates, general amenity grass such as village green at Cockerton or grass within all parks

across the Borough that are not sports pitches, e.g. Green Park, Stanhope Green, Denes, North Lodge Park, North Park, South Park, Alderman Crooks Park and all other large open spaces. These areas would only be cut once per year, grass would then be baled and removed.

Impact: Due the grass being overgrown, it would be difficult for young people to play in these areas as well as residents being able to walk and enjoy the parks and open spaces across the Borough. Wherever there is grass, it would look untidy throughout the growing season, retain more litter and be difficult for residents to remove dog dirt. Over time the grass will eventually become full of weed, looking even worse, and start to encroach on footpaths and the highway.

Existing frequency: Grass is generally cut on a 10-15 working day cycle.

Frequency following cuts: Grass will be cut once per annum, baled and removed from site. From a health and safety point of view, sightlines at junctions and roundabouts will be cut more frequently as required to ensure clear visibility for motorists.

Council Housing Land

All work carried out for Council Housing would continue as this is paid for through the HRA. The existing standards and frequencies would be maintained unless the specification is altered by Housing.

South Park

South Park currently has 3.2 gardeners working within the park, maintaining all the formal areas of the park to the current high standard.

Impact: With no resources to maintain South Park it would rapidly become run down with increased vandalism to facilities in the park, which would ultimately have to be removed for safety reasons as well as potential damage and vandalism to buildings and other structures in the park. There would be a significant potential of negative publicity and potential claw back from the HLF as they were a major funder of the refurbished South Park. This would impact on the Council's ability to attract further funding from HLF.

Existing frequency: The formal areas are maintained to a high standard by the existing gardening team within the park.

Frequency following cuts: No work would be carried out to the formal areas of the park.

Shrub Bed Pruning (included in Core Offer)

Shrub beds that are next to footpaths and the highways would continue to be maintained as they currently are with one full prune in the winter and other general maintenance throughout the year. This is to ensure that they do not become a health and safety hazard by encroaching on the highway or footpaths.

Hedge Cutting (included in Core Offer)

Maintenance of Council owned hedges would continue to the same standard as currently with one cut per annum. This is to ensure that they do not become a health and safety hazard by encroaching on the highway or footpaths.

Weed Spraying (included in Core Offer)

Weed spraying on hard surfaces would continue at the current service level with two operatives carrying out through the growing season. This work is essential for health and safety reasons ensuring there isn't excessive growth of weeds and vegetation on

pavements, which would cause trip hazards.

Floral Displays

All floral displays other than those in Sheltered Housing Accommodation and the Cemeteries would be stopped.

Sports Pitches (included in Core Offer)

Sports pitches would continue to be maintained across the Borough whether in a park or general open space, however grass that is not part of the sports pitch would not be cut as above.

It will be possible to consider extending wildflower meadow approach to a lot of the larger open spaces, however there is an upfront cost to this work of approximately £1500 per acre. It is not possible to use this approach on a lot of the smaller spaces as large equipment is required to cut and bale at the end of the season.

Parks and Countryside Management

This service currently looks after 7 local nature reserves (Maidendale, Drinkfield Marsh, Brinkburn, Rockwell, Geneva Wood,, Brankin Moor, The Whinnies) as well as other local wildlife sites, e.g. Red Hall, Cocker Beck, Baydale, Faverdale, West Park, Lakeside and Snipe Pond, and the overall management of parks and play areas. This service is also responsible for organising and managing all the volunteer work of Environmental Services including Friends Groups, Street Champions, Countryside volunteers, Darlington Cares and other organisations/groups that wish to become involved in assisting in maintaining these areas. Alongside this the Parks and Countryside Management provides advice and guidance to Planning colleagues with regard to green infrastructure.

Impact: As all staff would be redundant the impact of this proposal will mean there is no overall coordination of management of parks and countryside/nature reserves and there will be no funding to maintain them. The nature reserve sites, unless they can be handed over to the community, would ultimately need to be closed and fenced off as they would become a health and safety hazard over time, other parks and large open spaces will not be maintained, e.g. Denes, Green Park, Stanhope Green and many more as they don't have sports pitches. There would be no support for the Friends, Street Champions or other volunteer groups resulting in either people just getting on and doing it themselves in an ad hoc uncoordinated fashion, which could have serious implications for health and safety and the overall management of the sites.

Cumulative Impact:

As significant resources will be reduced from this range of services, there will be significant impact on the quality of the local environment with the closure of a range of facilities in South Park and the local nature reserves. There will be significantly increased risk of accidents within parks and open spaces as a result of reduced maintenance and resources to take corrective action.

There are currently 25 staff including 3 Team Leaders (one of which also covers Street Cleaning) involved in Grounds Maintenance and Horticultural Services, this would reduce to 17, a 32% reduction. At South Park, there are currently 3.2 FTE posts, which if the service was withdrawn, would reduce to zero. For the Parks and Countryside

service, there are currently 4.6 FTE posts, which again would reduce to zero, if the proposal is implemented.

In addition to this, the overall cumulative impact on the environment of this proposal alongside Street Cleaning and Environmental Crime will make the town a much less attractive place to live and invest.

WHAT IS THE CORE BUDGET MADE UP OF?

2019/20 budget £817,366

	Budget 2019/20 £
Employee	550,539
Premises*	220,281
Transport	279,733
Supplies & Services	86,551
Support Services	35,098
Income^	(388,686)
Overheads	33,850
Total	817,366

*Non-domestic rates would continue to be incurred with a cost of £32,000. Traffic management while cutting sightlines on highways would continue at a cost of £20,000. The remainder of the budget would be associated with maintenance arising from the reduced offer as well as works carried out on council housing land.

^Income is mainly associated with works carried out on housing council land.